



Missio Dei Transforming Intervention and Women: Missional Implications for Naga Churches and Society

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Introduction

In my pursuit to better understanding of gender roles in Naga society I have collected the stories of some women who shared their experiences¹ that provide the glimpses of gender role in Naga society. Areni recollects, “I grew up in a traditional patriarchal socio-cultural set up. I was taught to be humble, submissive, and silent and to tolerate without questioning at any point.”² Rokono lamented, “I felt sad and miserable when people distinguish me and put me lower than my male counterparts at home/ church and at work place.”³ Atoli expresses, “today unlike the past two decades there is a shift of better position for the women to play the leading role in every aspect.”⁴ Anungla continues, “If the properties are hard earned by the girls’ parents, the properties are shared and divided amongst the siblings of the deceased husband without regards to his daughters and wife. Our society being a paternal one, it will take time to accept the concept of a girl child owning the rights to inheritance of her parents’ owned properties. Maybe the parents need to be very wise on this sensitive matter.”⁵ The echoes of these stories and similar attitudes of many other Nagas that I have come across prompt me to delve into this subject matter and explore the stories of women in the Bible focussing on *Missio Dei* transforming intervention. The overall intention of this article is draw out missional implications for the Naga Churches and society.

I. Methodological Consideration

This approach is a combination of postcolonial indigenous and feminist methodologies as I will be engaging in the expressions and experiences of patriarchy from the writer’s context.⁶ On the other hand, contrary to the

¹ To maintain anonymity and confidentiality the names of the interviewees are fictitious.

² Areni, Email message to Temsulemla Longchar, Kohima, July 20, 2018.

³ Rokono, Email message to Temsulemla Longchar, Kohima, June 25, 2018.

⁴ Atoli, Email message to Temsulemla Longchar, Dimapur, July 20, 2018.

⁵ Anungla, Email message to Temsulemla Longchar, Kohima, July 20, 2018.

⁶ Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2012), 263.

approach that decides to be 'selective' and cut out those texts that do not promote the full humanity of women as not canonical, I will seek to support that all text is to be interpreted in the light of the whole Bible. This means "reading scripture as a collection of texts written over a long period of time in a variety of contexts and situations different from one's times."⁷ To discuss the subject, the stories of women in the Bible and Bosch's classic book *Transforming Mission* will serve as backdrop in the process of developing *Missio Dei* as transforming intervention for Naga women.

2. A Conceptual Discussion

Two fundamental concepts will be discussed with the view to correlate with the concepts

I would be dealing with in this article.

2.1. *Missio Dei*

Timothy C Tennet in his book "*Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century*" has succinctly captured the concept of mission of God. He argues,

"We are confronted with a personal God who is not silent, a God who acts, and a God who sends."⁸ He based this book on the assumption that God has engaged with human history with a mission. This is why missions is ultimately not about what we do but about who God is.

The God who reveals the Godself in the Bible is the God of mission.⁹ God the Parent is the providential source, as well as the goal, of the *Missio Dei*. The word providence means "to see beforehand."¹⁰ It captures the idea that God not only designed and initiated a plan a mission but also foresaw in advance that this plan would ultimately unfold to be a blessing to all nations or people groups.¹¹ God knows the final goal of the *Missio Dei* and that God is able to guide history toward that final goal. Because God already has ordained the final goal, God actually confirms it with an oath, swearing by God's own self that all nations will be blessed through the seed of Abraham (Genesis 22:16-18). The initiation by God and the final goal are linked together by God's sovereign providence.¹² As such, *Missio Dei* offers us a perspective to understand God's mission in Bible and in the history. This is affirmed by Michael W. Goheen who stresses, "Our identity is shaped by our participation in God's redemptive purposes."¹³

⁷ Natalie K. Watson, *Feminist Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 10.

⁸ Timothy C. Tennet, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2010), 214.

⁹ Tennet, *Invitation to World Missions*, 106.

¹⁰ Tennet, *Invitation to World Missions*, 118.

¹¹ Tennet, *Invitation to World Missions*, 118.

¹² Tennet, *Invitation to World Missions*, 118.

¹³ Michael W. Goheen, "Bible and Mission: Missiology and Biblical Scholarship in *Dialogue*," in *Christian Mission Old Testament Foundations and New Testament Developments*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 214.

In relation to the above discussion, Christopher J.H. Wright states that ‘missional’ is an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterised by mission, or has the qualities, attributes or dynamics of mission. He explicitly continues to expound that ‘missional’ is to the word ‘mission’ what covenantal is to covenant, or fictional to fiction.¹⁴ For instance, the Naga churches’ missional role is to obey the Great Commission Mandate by engaging in evangelism, baptizing, disciplining, healing, peace-making and so forth. Thus, exploring the nature of God from Naga women’s perspective and how it is revealed in God’s intervention in lives of women in the Bible will be the assumptions for developing *Missio Dei* as Transforming Intervention and Women as the writer’s construction of ‘Biblical Missional Theology.’

2.2. *TetsürTanur* (women and minor children)

The Oxford Dictionary defines woman as an ‘adult human female.’ The word *tsür*¹⁵ refers to a woman. It also refers to several other metaphors, which contain the word ‘woman,’ whose definition clearly indicates a socio-political, religio-cultural bias.¹⁶ Evangeline argues that while ‘a man on the street’ is defined as an ordinary average man, a ‘woman on the street’ is defined as a prostitute which reveals that it has a lot to do with construction of grammar.¹⁷ In this paper the term woman will represent a girl child, daughter, mother, and grandmother. That being clarified, it needs to be stated that in Ao Naga society, women are still grouped in the category of *aningnoza* (the children of the sky) and *tetsür tanur* (women and minor children) that indicates the general position of the women in society. A common statement *tetsür tanur alidak* (in the presence of women and children) is popularly used even today to differentiate the status of women from men, sometimes rating them as minor citizens irrespective of their status, age and qualifications. To insult the gender, they say, *parnok tetsür tanuri kechi metet?* (What do women and children know)¹⁸ We often hear men using these statements in many occasions even by educated and theologically trained men.¹⁹

3. Framework of *Missio Dei* Transforming Intervention and Women

The subsequent discussion is towards exploring the framework of *Missio Dei* transforming intervention and women.

¹⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 24.

¹⁵ The word *tsür* is found in the available Ao Dictionary. It is taken from *Temeshi Lai* Ao Naga Bible which uses *tsür* for the Samaritan woman in John 4.

¹⁶ Evangeline Anderson-Rajumar, “Significance of the ‘Body’ in Feminist Theological Discourse,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 33, no. 2 (December 2001): 83.

¹⁷ Evangeline, “Significance of the ‘Body’ in Feminist Theological Discourse,” 83.

¹⁸ N. Talitemjen Jamir and A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture: A Case Study of the Ao Naga Society and Culture* (Lumami, Mokokchung: Nagaland University Tribal Research Centre, 2005), 216.

¹⁹ I have heard my own family members using similar statement. Whenever I hear this statement even as an adolescent, I often get very frustrated for being deprived of my rights.

3.1. It Originates in Creation: Human Beings Created in the Image of God

The thrust of this proposal is that God created human beings in God's image (Genesis 1:26-28).²⁰ The terms 'image' and 'likeness' are used in reference to wo/man's unique endowment by God. They occur together for emphasis, not for distinction.²¹ Wright argues from missiological perspective that human beings have been created in the image of God with the immediate context of the narratives of Genesis 1-3 which implies four significant truths about humanity which is vital to Biblical mission: all human beings are addressable to God, all human beings are accountable to God, all human beings have dignity and equality, and the Biblical gospel fits all.²² It is inviting people to become more fully human through the transforming power of the gospel that fits all because it answers to the most basic need of all and restores the common glory of what is to be truly human—a man and a woman made in the image of God.²³ In this regard, W. Sibley Towner states, "The image of God is empowering and suggests that Old Testament view of human nature is far more positive than our dour stress on human sinfulness has led us to imagine."²³

G.W. Grogan argues that despite the fall the New Testament writers accept the divine image as an abiding reality (I Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9).²⁵ Each individual, both women and men are created in God's image marred by the humankind's fall but the *Imago Dei* is not lost as argued by some theologians as human beings are loved by God and are the objects of divine redemption. Conversely as R.L. Luni asserts unlike men "women have often accused of being half human beings or they are treated as second class human beings."²⁴ Such attitude and treatment gave rise to a distorted image of women. Therefore, as T. Arenla writes, "Naga women should affirm that they are created in God's image and possess equal worth and dignity." If human beings are created in God's image, then there should be no issue regarding 'which gender dominates whom.' *Missio Dei* intervention in the lives of women establishes the image of God in women. It affirms that male and female are equal human beings with equal worth and dignity.

3.2. Originates in a Context: God's Intervention in the Existing Milieu

The stories of women in the Bible took place in a particular culture and context. They represent different personalities of women, of varied circumstances and of social standing. They are portrayed as heroines, harlots, housewives, and other images. They were also victims of injustices and oppressive patriarchal structure. Eve, the first woman and a victim of injustice (Genesis: 2-4), Hagar unjustly treated by her mistress (Genesis 16; 21:9-17; 25:12.), Leah unloved by husband and not conventionally Beautiful (Genesis 29; 30; 49:31; Ruth 4:11), Rachel who was beautiful and barren (Genesis 29; 30; 31; 33:1,2,7; 35:16-26; 46:19,22,25; 48:7; Ruth 4:11; I

²⁰ Wealth of interpretation of the notion of image of God has been offered by Scholars which will not be discussed in this paper.

²¹ G.W. Grogan, "Image of God," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J Atkinson et al., (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 476.

²² Wright, *The Mission of God*, 422-424. ²³ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 424.

²³ W. Sibley Towner, "Clones of God: Genesis 1:26-28 and the Image of God in the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation Journal of Bible and Theology* 59, no. 4 (2005): 341. ²⁵ Grogan, "Image of God," 476.

²⁴ R. L. Hnuni, "Feminist Theology Methodology," in *Contextual Theologies: Methods and Perspective*, Wati Longchar (Complier) (Kolkota: SCEPTRE, 2013), 213.

Samuel 10:2; Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:18), Rahab a prostitute through whose line Jesus was born (Joshua 2; Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25), Daughter of Jephthah who was willingly sacrificed (Judges 11:30-39), Ruth a foreigner who is cited in the genealogy of Jesus (Ruth); Hannah the childless woman who prayed for a son (I Samuel 1; 2); Slave Hebrew girl who proclaimed her faith (II Kings 1-19); Esther a beautiful Jewish woman of intelligence and courage (Esther); Gomer the adulteress was loved by her husband (Hosea); Mary a humble peasant girl who became the mother of the saviour Jesus (Matthew 1; 2; Luke 1; 2; John 2:1-11; 19:25; Acts 1:14); Mary Magdalene the woman who had seven devils (Matthew 27:56,61; 28:1; Mark 15:40,47; 16:1-19; Luke 8:2; 24:10);

John 19:25; 20:1-18); the daughter suffering from infirmity (Luke 13:10-17); woman of Samaria (John 4); woman taken in Adultery (John 8:1-11; Deuteronomy 17:5-6); Lydia a professional Woman (Acts 16); Phoebe a Trustworthy Woman (Romans 16:1-2). Their prayers, struggles and voices were heard by God. God was interested in their lives. These women in the Bible had experienced God's transforming intervention in the given milieu. The *Missio Dei* of transforming intervention in their plight and dilemmas brought about wholistic healing in their lives. As Ruth Tucker rightly contended, "without Bible women, female missionaries would have been at a loss"²⁵ consequently, these liberated women played a significant role in missions' story.

Similarly, stories of Naga women in the present milieu display how the patriarchal system is still evident today. Although the Bible was written over a long period of time in a variety of contexts and situations different from present times the issues faced by women such as barrenness, rape and exploitation in the Naga society are some common experiences of women in the Bible. Hence, the women experiences in the Bible are a norm for developing *Missio Dei* transforming intervention for Naga girls and women today.

3.3. It Originates from God's Nature: Justice- Righteousness:

It is God of justice and righteousness who saw the condition of women and intervened in their circumstances. This idea is taken from David Bosch who explicitly argues that in

Matthean notion God's reign is linked in a mysterious way with the concept of *dikaioisyne*.²⁶ He holds that the English language is unable to embrace the wide scope of the concept *dikaioisyne* in one word and so the term justice- righteousness is an attempt to hold both

dimensions. *Dikaioisyne* is faith in action, the practice of devotion or an act of right conduct before God (Matthew 6:10) and it is doing the will of God. It manifests itself in active faith in

God's involvement in history.²⁷ Hebrew words for justice and right can have various meanings. J. D. Preez argues that:

God's covenant love for his people and for the world which is to be led to him by this people, is a love which shows itself in justice 'tsedeq; tshedâquâh' and in right (*mishpât*). Justice is a quality of Yahweh

²⁵ Ruth A Tucker, "The Role of Bible Women in World Evangelism," *Missiology* 13, no. 2. April (1985): 134.

²⁶ David. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 71.

²⁷ Bosch,

Himself. He is just *'tsaddiq'* in his nature and therefore also in his dealings with people (Neh. 9:8; Ps. 7:10; Zeph. 3:5). As God of the covenant his justice is for the benefit of his people (Ps. 22:32; 65:6).³⁶ It is in reality an imputed righteousness for the salvation of God's people (Is. 46:13). But in the people of the covenant, it should lead to just behaviour towards other people: "Be far from oppression" (Is. 54:14).²⁸

God in the Bible is righteous and just. His actions are those of justice. God does not fail in dispensing justice. God is consistently just, which is why when God saw injustices inflicting on women God did not remain passive, God intervened. The following definition made by

Deborst Padilla Ruth is worth noting: "Doing justice, then, is not a human political program but a passion that grows out of the heart of God. In God's dictionary, justice is defined as redemptive restoration of all things that are wrong. Justice sets things right; it vindicates the victims; it gives them another chance."²⁹ For Ruth "justice must be an integral part of our agenda if we are Christians because it is an integral part of who God is and of his action in the world.... justice is our concern because of who God has made us to be and because of what he calls us to do in his world."³⁰ Then, if justice-righteousness is the will of God, *Missio Dei* is to intervene in the lives of the people who are the victims of voiceless, injustices and oppressive structures. It is to restore them to their rightful place in the church and society. It is to enable women to experience God personally and declare praises to the Triune God.

3.4. *Missio Dei* as Intervention Brings Wholeness

And finally, God's definition of Justice brings wholeness. *Missio Dei* as transforming intervention brought about wholeness in the lives of the women recorded in the Bible. For instance, Mary Magdalene who had been once sick was cured by Jesus and other outcaste women were accepted and made whole. These women became faithful disciples and ministered to Jesus out of their income (Luke 8:1-3). Ruth defines wholeness as "integrity, being of one heart, living in peace with oneself."³¹ She proposes that:

"it is only possible when men and women are reconciled with God, their Creator, and only source of full life through the redeeming action of Jesus Christ. God made us to be in a steady, unbroken relationship with him. Mere relationship with God does not complete the picture, though. Abundant life intrinsically necessitates reconciliation with fellow human beings. Wholeness is only possible when men and women are reconciled with one another. Such reconciliation also depends on and is only possible thanks to the cross (Ephesians 1)."³²

²⁸ Preez Du J., "Social Justice: Motive for the Mission of the Church," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 53, no. 1 (1985): 36.

²⁹ Deborst Padilla Ruth, "Scrabble, Injustice, and Me," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 1, no. 1 (2003): 10.

³⁰ Ruth, "Scrabble, Injustice, and Me," 11.

³¹ Ruth, "Scrabble, Injustice, and Me," 12.

³² Ruth, "Scrabble, Injustice, and Me," 12.

Such was a mission of God towards humankind. God's mission was to bring wholeness to both men and women. As Ruth observes, this call for a depth relationship and faith in the redeeming work of Jesus, in whom it is possible to bring reconciliation between men and women, between human and the nature.³³

4. Missiological Implications

The above discussion highlighted the framework of *Missio Dei* as transforming intervention and women. The focus in the following section is to draw out its implications for the contemporary Naga churches.

4.1. Individual Level

In the culture and society where sculpting women's own identity is a challenge *Missio Dei* intervention gives new identity to women as created in the image of God. Contrary to the definition of women as a sex object, docile, submissive, less value people and second-class citizens, women as created in God's image possess equal worth and dignity. Thus, Naga churches' engaging in restoring women equal worth and dignity is a missional task. It will demand the church to rise above the existing patriarchal mind set to God's way of doing mission.

4.2. Ecclesiastical Level

Another missional approach is encouraging women's full involvement in the church level. Today modernization has enabled Naga women to be aware of the inadequacy of the role traditionally assigned to them. Narola Imchen aptly observes that,

“Theologically trained women, of which there began to be an increasingly larger number, became aware of those modern theological trends that stress the equality of both sexes before God. If both women and men are one in Christ spiritually, then it became more difficult for women to accept a subordinate role in the Church. The new theological awareness coupled with a changing world in which new role models for women began to be available made it increasingly difficult for at least well educated Ao women to accept the traditional roles assigned to them in both the society and the Church.”³⁴

Similarly, Juliet Yeptho³⁵ expresses that the attitude towards women in the church are still strongly controlled by traditional ideas.³⁶ Church is as the body of Christ which comprises of men and women responsible to build up one another and glorify God. The members of the church should not feel excluded on the basis of gender. As such, there is a need for missional intervention in the churches concerning women status and participation. Such intervention is indispensable to bring men and women who will serve together as equal partners thereby participating in the extension of God kingdom on earth. Besides worshipping and singing praises together to the Triune God.

³³ Ruth, “Scrabble, Injustice, and Me,” 12.

³⁴ Moanaro Imchen Jamir, “The Role of Ao Women in Church and Society,” *Indian Journal of Theology* 37, no. 1 (1995): 53.

³⁵ Juliet Yeptho serves as Pastor in Sumi Baptist Church Dimapur, Nagaland. She is one of the few women in Nagaland who is holding a position of a pastor.

³⁶ Juliet Yeptho, “Role of Sumi Women in the Church and Society,” in *No more Sorrow in God's Garden of Justice*, ed. Limatula Longkumer (Jorhat: Women Study Department, Eastern Theological College, 2007), 114.

4.3. In the Society Level

Today many Naga women have risen to higher positions in the society because of education and their realization of their capabilities. In Nagaland most daughters are supporting their parents and others with their income. Many mothers and wives earn more than their spouse. So, their family income is much higher. Conversely, violence against women and rape is rampant in Nagaland.³⁷ Besides, some women activists and professionals said the crime data provided by the police does not paint the real picture of crime against women in Nagaland, as most crime against women go unreported. Some police officials also admitted that many women victims in the State do not come forward and report incidents of violence against them due to the social stigma attached and family/societal pressure, which are typically patriarchal behaviour.³⁸ Women though well-educated and accomplished in their works are still considered mostly as *tetsür tanur* i.e. 'women and children' which implies lesser persons and not equals.

Missio Dei as intervention in the lives of women is liberating because they are able to see the demeaning reality and muster the courage to express their rights and views. They do so because they realise that they are created in God's image. Today, though the contributions of Naga women in the society may not be lauded enough by the people, they have stood up courageously against the prevailing injustices and other evils in the society. Thus, the Church's *Missio Dei* as transforming intervention for women is to involve in the ministry of empowering women which is crucial not only for women but for family, society and church. The theme of International Women's Day 2015 'Empowering Women- Empowering Humanity: Picture It!' speaks loud and clear. The theme suggests a world where each woman and girl can exercise her choices, such as participating in politics, getting an education, having an income, and living in societies free from violence and discrimination.³⁹

Conclusion

In recapitulation, God is the foundation of *Missio Dei* as transforming intervention for women. The image of God in every woman is the thrust that affirms the dignity and worth of women. Moreover, the stories of women in the Bible are no different from the stories and experiences of Naga women today. God exactly understands women's predicament. And so God is seen as the prime mover behind the scenes. *Missio Dei* as intervention brings wholeness in every woman. Thus, the missional task of the Naga churches is to advocate *Missio Dei* as transforming intervention in the lives of girls and women thereby there will be a paradigm shift in the existing understanding of ministry. Besides, there will be evidences of transcending the oppressive patriarchal structures and the demeaning circumstances of women, women and men honouring and respecting one another as persons of worth, and the Naga society will be moving towards a community of justice- righteousness: a community of wholeness.

³⁷ Morung Express Correspondent Kohima, "Crimes against women on the rise in Nagaland," October 14, 2017, 1.

³⁸ Page News Desk Dimapur, "Crimes against women in Nagaland: Patriarchal behavior impedes justice," *Nagaland Page*, April 20, 2018, 1.

³⁹ FPA India, "International Women's Day 2015," *Nagaland Post*, March 8, 2015, 6.

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